

Kwanzaa Overview

Founded by **Dr. Maulana Karenga** Kwanzaa focuses on seven core principles that link African traditions with American customs. Each principle is featured during one of the seven days of the celebration, which runs from December 26 through January 1 each year.

The word Kwanzaa is derived from the Swahili (an East African language) phrase “matunda ya Kwanza,” meaning “first fruits of the harvest.” The holiday itself reflects the reward of family and friends working together to produce the season's crop.



The holiday's daily ritual begins with the lighting of one of the seven candles, representing seven principles, placed in the kinara (kee-NAH-rah).

The order of the 7 principles is:

Umoja, Kujichagulia, Ujima, Ujamaa, Nia, Kuumba, and Imani

After a candle is lit, family and friends discuss that day's principle, their ancestry, and ancestors. The first candle lit and placed in the center of the kinara is the black candle, which is symbolic of unity. In the following days, the lighting alternates between the red and green candles daily to commemorate each principle. The three red candles are for self-determination, cooperative economics, and creativity. The three green candles represent collective work and responsibility, purpose, and faith. Often the green candles are placed to the right of the black candle and the three red candles are placed on the left side.

Families set aside time on the first day of Kwanzaa to make handmade gifts that speak to African heritage to exchange during the Karamu (feast). Playing drums and making music is a big part of the entertainment for the Karamu.

The Karamu (Kwanzaa Feast)

Here's how the Karamu is celebrated on Kwanzaa:

Welcoming

The feast begins with the welcoming of elders and distinguished guests.

Remembering

Next, some form of cultural expression—such as a song, dance, or storytelling—is performed.

Short talk

Someone will say a few words of importance, perhaps an honored guest. The focus of the short talk is the principle of the day, similar to a New Year's resolution.

Rejoicing

This is when an offering is poured into the Kikombe cha Umoja (the Unity Cup) and all drink from it. Drums are played as the names of ancestors and African-American heroes are called. This is also when the feast begins and more songs and dances are performed.

Farewell statement

This is when the karamu is finished and friends and loved ones bid each other farewell.



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The definition of the Kwanzaa principles are:

Umoja (oo-MOH-JAH) – Unity

To strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation, race.

Kujichagulia (koo-ji-chah-goo-LEE-ah) – Self-determination

To define ourselves instead of being defined by others.

Ujima (oo-JEE-mah) – Collective work and responsibility

To build and maintain our community together and solve problems together.

Ujamaa (oo-jah-MAH) – Cooperative economics

To build and maintain the stores and businesses in our community and to profit from them together.

Nia (NEE-ah) – Purpose

To build and develop our community to restore our people to their traditional greatness.

Kuumba (koo-OO-mbah) – Creativity

To do always as much as we can, in the way we can, in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.

Imani (ee-MAH-nee) – Faith

To believe with all our heart in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders and the righteousness and victory of our struggle.

